

The First Canberra Scout Troops (1915-1925)

Young Australians An Illustrated Monthly For Boys suitably bound into a five hundred page book sat on my shelves almost forgotten until recently. This monthly magazine, published in 1900 is British to the Core and the only connection with Australia is the book's title and two short stories - *New South Wales Troopers*, *Snapshots of Colonial Soldier* and *Phil, An Australian Sketch*.

During the process of skimming through the book one story caught my eye - *The Defender of Mafeking, Something About Col R S S Baden-Powell*. I read it! It is a romanticized version of Baden-Powell's student years and military career and service in the colonies of the British Empire. The stories reads like a series of grand adventures in which Baden-Powell is portrayed as an almost superhuman hero and a person of impeccable character. Some of the story reads as follows:

"What he dared and did during the Matanele rising in reconnoitering everybody knows. Weird work it was too. Creeping out at night, crawling over rocky boulder-strewn kopjes, sliding along snake-wise on exposed ground and getting close to kralls or camp fires to see what the enemy were doing, and overhearing what they intended to do.

And that brings us to what is the best known of B-P's numberless accomplishments - that of scouting. A little red covered shilling book by him on the subject has for some months past found its place on railway bookstalls, and possibly many of you boys will have dipped into it. If you have not, take my advice and get it. There are hints in that book which will be of real service in training you in the knack of observing.

If you were out in South Africa, and a member of one or other of those corps of Irregular Horse, the information and 'tips' it gives would be invaluable. But even if you use it in your own country it will add immensely to the interests of your runs and rambles..."

Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell was the founder of an organization designed to meet the needs and interests of boys. It is a movement which has captured the imagination and sense of adventure of children so much that it is now a world wide movement.

A short history of the Girl Guide Movement - founded by Baden-Powell's sister - is found in the December 11, 1925 issue of *The Canberra Community News*. It gives an indication of the importance of scouting to the world of children around the turn of the century - a time when in many homes *children were seen and not heard*. The article in part reads:

"Long ago in the Paleolithic period of Guide History, little groups of girls in quaint clothes of many colours might have been seen marching along with haversacks, water bottles and broomsticks[walking sticks]. Their dresses were quaint, their manner wild, but their backs were straight, and a look in their faces of fixed determination; someone was calling in a way that no one had ever called before. The Pied Piper had piped and the boys had dropped their books and toys to follow him out into the woods, and the girls were following too. 'Go home', said the grownups, 'it is not for you.' 'Go back'" said the boys, 'This is our game not yours.' 'Go away,' said the Piper, 'I am piping to the boys.' But the girls had caught the strains of the music, and they had to follow. All they had read in their story books, all that they had dreamed in their

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dreams, was happening before them; their own brothers were turning into frontiersmen, explorers, 'Scouts'. It was too late to go back; so it happened that as early as September, 1909 at the first Scout Rally in the Crystal Palace, London, some girls braving ridicule managed to work their way in among 8,000 Scouts, to see the Great Chief, whom they claimed as their Chief too. Nor were they to be disappointed, for though the Piper was busy with the boys, he had to be true to himself, and if the girls had followed to the tune of his music, then the magic would work for them too; thus he wrote in the last page of a small pamphlet on Scouting: 'A similar scheme might be started for girls and they might be called 'Guides'.

Acting on this brief suggestion, certain ladies rallied these wandering nomads and started Companies of Guides, and in 1910 Miss Baden-Powell, sister of the Chief Scout, consented to become their President...[Today girls have the choice of joining either Guides or Scouts].

The Scout movement reached Australia in 1907 and the federal territory by 1915 when W O Russell of Acton established the First Scout Troop. His son Charles, who until his recent death,¹ lived at Red Hill, recalled during an interview that one of the first official duties of the then newly formed troop was to attend and take part in the funeral and burial ceremonies of Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges KCB, CMG held on Friday 3rd September, 1915. Another troop, formed in 1917 at hall was also known as *First Canberra*. Its history is currently being written by Mr Laurie Lee.

In 1925 another *First Canberra Troop* was formed. It's history was recorded on the pages of the May 9, 1927 issue of *The Canberra Community News*. It in part reads:
"Although two or three attempts had previously been made to established this world wide organization in the Federal Capital Territory, it was not until October, 1925, that a serious move was made to place the movement on a permanent footing.

In that month a few interested people gathered in the Acton Hall to hear an illustrated lecture on the boy scout movement from the Director of the Organization of the NSW Section. It was then resolved that a troop should be formed in Canberra, and Mr CW Guthrie of the 1st Mosman and late of the 9th Midland (England) Troop, undertook to instruct the boys who were anxious to join. A Troop Committee was formed at Acton and the 1st Canberra Troop made its entry into the world.

*Five other troops were then formed at Duntroon, Causeway, Eastlake [Kingston] and Westridge. Lastly we have the fifth Canberra Troop, a 'closed' troop for Catholic boys under the guidance of Rev Father Griffin, an enthusiastic worker who is just entering the scout movement.[According to a 1926 issue of *The News* another scout troop was formed at Molonglo - it may have been shortlived?]*

In August, 1926, a District Association was formed under the presidency of JH Butters Esq to administrate the scouting activities of the Federal Capital Territory. Dr RM Alcorn, late District

¹ Circa 1997

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Scoutmaster of Maitland was appointed by the NSW Headquarters to be the District Commissioner for the FCT Association and Mr CE Pike undertook the secretarial duties.

After many months of restricted training through lack of suitable headquarters (meeting weekly at the house of the Scoutmaster, and during summer in the paddocks) the Third Canberra Scout Troop are now established in the Scout's Hall Causeway, a building [small hall] at the disposal of the Scout's Association by the Federal Capital Commission. This hall is being used by any of the scouting bodies who require it, and a class for leaders is held there weekly by Mr Guthrie, now District Scoutmaster.

The 1st Queanbeyan Troop recently affiliated with the District Association, bringing a troop of some 40 in number. The greatest drawback encountered in the Federal Territory is the scattered nature of the district and the scarcity of boys of scouting age, but the numbers enrolled at present approximately 42 Scouts and 42 Wolf Cubs, the former including 9 First Class and 21 Second Class Scouts...[At the time Mr Arthur Paynting of Causeway was Scout Master of the Third Troop. Mr Hammond of Westridge was Scout Master of the 4th Troop].

Mr Guthrie kept a diary of scouting activities and during 1925 and 1926 extracts from it were published in *The Community News*. The issue dated December 11, 1925 in part reads:
16 Oct. The Boy Scout Association Organiser, H McAlister, Esq DCC came to Canberra and delivered an interesting lecture in the Acton Hall, illustrated by lantern. After the lecture a meeting was held and it was decided to form a Troop to be called 1st Canberra. I was asked to be Scoutmaster and accepted...

17th Oct. Mr McAlister and myself met some of the boys behind Commission Headquarters, played a few games, Crows and Cranes, Blindfold, team races, Gyroscope and a few other. Picked Ted Waterman, Brian Lucas and N Marshall for Patrol Leaders.

22nd Oct. Met Eastlake and Hall. A good roll up of boys. SM Jessop and Paynting also present. Had a good talk on Scout Law and explained why it was the whole or everything in Scouting.

24th Oct. Went on a week-end camp behind Black Mountain. Had a talk on camping and hygiene. The weather was beautiful, couldn't have been better for camping. The night was cold. Round the camp fire the boys sang and recited. I led a debate on Scout Law, taking the negative side, but hadn't a leg to stand on, so I gave in. The boys went to bed about 10.30 pm but were restless again at 1.30 am. At 5 am the bigger boys went shooting but had no luck. At 5.30 I took the balance of the boys and went for a run about two miles. When we came back we went for a swim and the boys stayed naked all day. All got sunburnt. A good lesson for next time. We had plenty of swimming, played a few games in lieu of physical jerks and went through a second class test. The site was fair. The only fault was the absence of shade. Left for home at 4 pm.

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31st Oct. Met behind Acton and went in the paddock below Sheaffe's among the willows. Did a little drill and patrol formation by signals, also semaphore, signalling. Practical artificial respiration, set a few sand pictures, and played a few games...

24th Nov. First Court of Honour of the Troop was held at Mr Waterman's residence Civic Centre [Braddon]. The meeting was a little slow, the boys being new to a thing of this kind. Present: Teddy Waterman, N Marshall, B Lucas, I Dunn, J Kelly, ASM Matthews and SM Guthrie.

28th Nov. Met at Howie's Mill and went to the Causeway where a hall was being built by voluntary labour. This was the first public appearance of the boys in uniform. They worked well, and won the appreciation of everybody - bouquets being thrown in all directions. We stayed for an impromptu concert at night the boys enjoying it thoroughly. Ken Dinnerville [of Howie's Cottages] contributed to the programme. This is the first public service the boys as a troop the boys as a troop have rendered. They are something to be proud of. [Ken and his friend, Arthur Freeman - also of Howie's Cottages - nailed the Causeway Hall floorboards down and assisted the men by fetching and carrying].

29th November. Left Canberra for a place called 'Kambah'. Followed directions accurately as we thought but failed to get where we wanted. We met a man who directed us to the Murrumbidgee River. Parked the bikes under a tree and set out on foot, walking about three miles. We found an admirable spot, had lunch there and plenty of swimming. Coming back the party separated and some of the boys were lost for an hour. They smiles and whistled (as the eighth Scout Law says). We heard a whistle and answered it and they found themselves... At night I took R Meadows, I Dunn, E Leach and Arty Freeman up to Capitol Hill and invested them and asked them to take the Scout Promise which they did. I took them there because I thought they were to be the men of tomorrow I could impress them more what good citizenship meant, also the full significance of the Scout Promise.

1st Dec. Met at Acton. Mr Matthews instructed in Semaphore. I took A Patrick [of Howies Cottages], A Dinnerville, W Gelately, J Kelly, E Kingston and examined them in Scout Law. Was satisfied that these boys realised the meaning of it all. At a quarter to nine, I and Mr Paynting took these boys up to Capitol Hill and initiated them, I asking them to take the promise and presenting them with the badge, Mr Paynting adding to my remarks reminding the boys what the badge stood for, also that they receiving it clean and it was their job to keep it clean by clean living...²

Arthur Freeman, who in 1927 lived in 13 Howie's Cottages told me a little about his years in the Canberra First Scout Troop. He spoke about earning the badges including First Aid, Swimming and one to do with housekeeping. The examiner for the latter was Mrs Waterman and the testing ground in her home. One of the tasks set was good bedmaking. Badges when received were sewn by Arthur on to a false sleeve which he still has today.

² Capitol Hill Camp was the home of Mr Guthrie. Here he had a cubicle to himself instead of sharing with another. He was given the privilege because he was Scoutmaster and kept Scouting goods in his cubicle.

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Arthur also recalled the scouts involvement in the ceremonies held at the Provisional Parliament House on 9 May, 1927. The Scouts formed a line on the left hand side of the steps and had a good view of the arrival of the Duke and Duchess of York. Scouts, Ivan Neville, Jack Kelly, Sidney Miller, Fred Hill and Eric Parr acted as messengers and others assisted at the First Aid Station.



The Scouts of the territory no longer have to meet under street lights or willow trees down near the Molonglo River. Each of the forty groups has its own meeting place and one - the hall in Hovea Street O'Connor - home of the 13th Troop, has links with Charlie Guthrie's time. It was the old Engineers' Mess. It was built circa 1916. It was moved in 1927 or 1928 to a new site near the railway station where it served for a time as the Friendly Society's Hall.

In the early 1960s it was moved to its present site.

Perhaps if Charlie Guthrie could return today he would be surprised and perhaps a little uncertain about how to approach the Scouts of today for amongst their numbers are girls who prefer Scouting to Guides and take full part in Scouting Life.

Above – Circa 1927 L-R Charlie Guthrie, Arthur Paynting, unknown & unknown. Below left Scouts working on the construction of the Causeway Hall 1925 and Scouts at the opening of the Federal Government in the Provisional Parliament House 9 May 1927.

